

Fast ditch effort

Crew spends weekend clearing Hamakua ditch of debris

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West Hawaii Today

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Tuesday, November 21, 2006 8:42 AM HST

Farmers in Waimea have relief in their water supply after a massive volunteer effort this weekend cleared all debris from the upper Hamakua ditch that blocked water flow since the Oct. 15 earthquakes.

A volunteer crew of local farmers, state and Hawaii County Civil Defense, state Department of Agriculture, the Department of Water Supply, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Hawaii National Guard spent the weekend using shovels, buckets, wheelbarrows and even their hands to clear areas of the ditch. By Monday evening, blockages along the ditch were 100 percent cleared by the modern-day bucket brigade and water was flowing back into the 60 million gallon reservoir, state Civil Defense administrator Ed Teixeira said.

"You talk about happy people -- everyone there was cheering," Teixeira said when the last landslide was cleared Monday, almost three days ahead of schedule. The upper Hamakua ditch, also known as Waimea ditch, serves all agricultural land in Waimea from Lakeland to Lalamilo Farm Lots. "Now that it is cleared of debris, farmers can get water again through their pipes like they used to for decades, if not hundreds of years," Teixeira said.

All three water supplies to agricultural land in Waimea and Hamakua -- the Kohala Ditch and upper and lower Hamakua ditch -- were severely damaged as a result of the 6.7 and 6.0 magnitude earthquakes and hundreds of aftershocks that struck the area last month.

Blockage from landslides along the ditches has prevented water flow for more than a month, leaving farmers struggling to conserve water supplies while still maintaining their crops.

"We've been voluntarily under 10 percent conservation, or at least that's what we've been trying to do," said Waimea farmer Donna Mah, who grows several varieties of lei flowers on her property.

While air surveys by state and local officials showed extensive damage to the hard-to-reach Kohala Ditch and lower Hamakua Ditch, the upper portion of the Hamakua Ditch, near White Road Trail and the 60 million gallon Waimea Reservoir in Waimea, showed accessible areas that could be cleared by rolling up some sleeves, local farmers said.

"They had to go in on foot and do all the work with just manpower. You can't get any equipment in there," said Waimea resident Patti Cook, who was on-site Sunday for the massive project. "There were about 20 state Civil Defense volunteers literally digging with their hands."

One small farm backhoe was brought in to help with the clean out.

With much prodding from the farming community, FEMA convinced state Civil Defense administrator Ed Teixeira to facilitate the volunteer effort to clear blockages. Teixeira called in the National Guard to assist and the Department of Land and Natural Resources quickly gave the volunteer group the right of entry to the area to begin the effort, dubbed "Operation Laulima."

By the end of the weekend, approximately 1.6 miles of the ditch had been cleared by the group, and by Monday evening, the water was flowing again into the reservoir, which was filled by about six inches and encompassed the entire width, Teixeira said. But the Kohala Ditch and lower Hamakua Ditch are going to need much more than a weekend of shoveling, said Hawaii County Civil Defense Administrator Troy Kindred.

The upper Hamakua Ditch "was the least impacted as far as the ditches are concerned. There is water in that ditch," Kindred said. "It's the inlets along the Kohala Ditch and lower Hamakua Ditch that are going to take more effort. (The blockages) are back in tight corners that aren't accessible

and the area is really unstable. We are working on ways to help the farmers out of their situation as quickly as possible."